Young People Cop to It: Technology Is Bad for Us

Column By MICHAEL S. MALONE

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Technology in all of its forms -- [social networks](http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Technology/story?id=7180264&page=1), [smart phones](http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Technology/story?id=7473962&page=1), the Web, instant messaging, online gaming -- is a net loss for today's young people, at least according to one group of Silicon Valley eighth-graders.

"It's bad for us, but it sure is fun," said Eric Bautista, 13, one of the students in Sister Jolene Schmitz's junior high school class at Resurrection School in Sunnyvale, Calif.

Admittedly, this informal survey offers, at best, only anecdotal evidence. Still, it is pretty shocking that a group of young teenagers, all of them technologically very astute and living in the very heart of [Silicon Valley](http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Technology/story?id=7239804&page=1), would come to such a conclusion.

These kids, born about the time the Internet became widely adopted, live within blocks of where the Intel microprocessor, the Apple computer and the Atari video game all were [invented](http://abcnews.go.com/Business/Technology/story?id=6966697&page=1). They spend their days (and nights) surfing the Web, playing online games and instant messaging. Most have cell phones in their backpacks. And many have at least one parent who works in the electronics industry.

Yet, when asked to weigh the benefits of having high technology in their lives versus the costs -- intellectually, emotionally, socially -- of that technology, the class voted 31-3 negative … a ratio so extreme that it argues against an aberration and toward a larger question about the overall impact of technology on the lives of our young people.

"We try to find the happy medium," said Stephanie Abreu, 13, "But we don't know where it is."

This isn't to say that the eighth-graders, all of them heading off to top-tier Silicon Valley high schools, don't love their tech toys and tools. On the contrary, when asked to list all of the positives about tech, they weren't short of answers: access to information with unprecedented scope, the ability to socialize with large groups over vast distances, 24/7 multi-media communication, and perhaps best of all, whole new worlds of entertainment.

Moreover, this brave new digital world has always been part of their lives and, perhaps a bit jaded by it all, they find the idea of a world without computers and cell phones surprisingly appealing: In a class vote, one-third of the students said they would prefer to have lived in the long-ago, pre-tech world of the late 1950s.

When asked what they find wrong with living in our modern, wired, Web world, the students had no shortage of answers, most of which fell into a half-dozen categories. I'll let the students largely speak for themselves -- voices describing the dark side of the tech revolution with a sincerity few of us adults have ever heard before:

**Time-waster:** "Technology is the key to procrastination," said Kenny Kobetsky, 14. Eighty percent of the class said they had missed sleep because of playing on the Internet, 50 percent said they had forgotten to do homework for the same reason. "The Internet is just so tantalizing," said Nick Gregov, 14. "I actually think McDonald's is healthier than my computer," added Blake Billiet, 13. Though the students did admit that the Web and cell phone can save time that used to be burned up driving to the store or library, few felt that these gains exceeded the many hours wasted on text or Web surfing.

**Loss of motivation:** "With all of these toys, it's hard to get out of the house," said Sybile Moser, 14. Many of the students said that while technology makes it easier to access information and learn new things, the lack of interaction with others often makes that learning biased and distorted -- because you only learn what you want to learn. "The students miss the give-and-take, the debate of learning together when they are on the Web," said Sister Jolene. Because of this, the students said, it's hard for them to keep their attention fixed on any one topic, but they prefer, instead, to drift along in the information flow, letting it take them wherever it leads.

**Addictive:** "The Internet is like a gateway drug," said Christine Doan, 13. Alex Nguyen, 13, compared the experience to eating ice cream: You love it even though it's bad for you. Even at their young age, many of the students already had Facebook pages and spent as much time there as watching television. Not surprisingly then, when asked if, despite all of their worries about the cost of technology in their lives, if any of them would give up their laptop or their cellphone, almost no one raised a hand.

**Second-Hand Knowledge:** This answer was probably the biggest surprise. The eighth-graders seemed to intuitively appreciate that the experiences and information they received from the Web and other digital sources was essentially a simulacrum of reality -- a re-creation on a glowing flat screen of the three-dimensional, natural world and that something was being lost in the translation. "We don't get as much out of things if we don't experience them ourselves," said Lauren Fahey, 13. "We seem to spend a lot of our lives as bystanders," added Katherine Wu, 13.

**Exposure:** The news is regularly filled with stories of Internet predators preying on naïve young people, or about the easy availability to adolescents of online pornography and other vices. But these eighth-graders were anything but innocents about the dark side of the Web -- and, indeed, showed surprising maturity in their strategies for coping with threats all but unknown to previous generations. "Look, when you're talking to a 'friend,' you don't really know if it's really them -- especially if they are introduced by someone else," said Peyton Yniguez, 14. "The nature of friendship changes," said Jonathon Robbins, 14. But the most astute, and disturbing, comment belonged to Jenna Kunz, 14: "You have to develop your own special conscience for the Internet."

**Disturbed Values:** All of these forces can't help but affect a young person's sense of values. The eighth-graders, in some ways sophisticated beyond their years, instinctively understand that. "We can't respect anything anymore," said Eric Bautista. Added Jenna Kunz: "You don't care about things as much; you aren't as passionate as you should be." And yet, that said, these are still kids who are excited about graduation and the prospects of the impending four years of high school. And as world-weary as they might sound, each one of the above comments provoked conversation so loud and lively that Sister Jolene spent most of the time just trying to keep the noise down to a dull roar.

In the end, if the news is surprising to us adults that teenagers believe technology is a net loss in their lives, there is consolation in knowing that these young people -- themselves creations of the digital age -- are not starry-eyed acolytes of the latest computer game or Web site. Rather, technology is the world they casually operate within, and they have a deep understanding of its rewards and its costs, what it gives and takes away. And for all of our fears for them, they themselves show an extraordinary sense of perspective.

Stephanie Abreu said it best: "Technology is like family. Sometimes it's good, sometimes bad. But you love it all the same."